

Kevin Gover, Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs

Indian people are the poorest of the poor. We consistently rank on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and similar findings show in nearly every social category. Forty-nine percent of our available workforce is without a job. But the media, Congress, and much of the American public believe that since the tribes have begun Indian gaming, we are all rich, driving Cadillacs, and eating filet mignon paid for with food stamps.

We need to change this picture, frame the national debate on American Indian issues in reality, and more effectively and forcefully communicate to the United States Government and the American people who we are, what we are trying to accomplish, and why this is good for Indian Country and the nation. And we have to do this now. It is going to take perseverance and vigilance—for the Office of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the tribes, elected representatives, and the media. But it must be done as soon as possible.

We have our supporters but we also have our detractors. And many detractors answer to the name of Congressman, Senator, or Governor. We have seen what happens when we don't frame Indian issues ourselves. Throughout U.S. history, anytime the tribes have had something that someone in the dominant society perceived as valuable, there have been legal and political moves to take it away. An Indian business begins to see success, and someone in the non-Indian community says, "The Indians are hurting my business, they must be stopped."



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I am sorry to say that this still appears to be the case. In the past three sessions of Congress, we have seen moves to take away one-third of the revenue of tribes with gaming operations, to enforce taxation by the states on tribally-owned land and businesses, to take away the right of tribes to provide for their people—because some powerful interest groups asked a Congressman to promote their interests and destroy a tribe's attempt to provide jobs and opportunities for its people.

Of the 557 federally-recognized tribes in the country, about 15 are truly prosperous. I congratulate these tribes. They are leading us back into territory most of us have forgotten. We know all too well what it means to survive. These tribes are showing us how traditional Indian values can find expression in modern prosperity.

But the vast majority of tribes are desperately poor. The last time America experienced a level

of poverty anywhere near that of Indian communities, with no work and no opportunity, was during the Great Depression. The Federal Government's answer to that problem was to put America back to work through programs like the Works Progress Administration. For Indian Country, we see no WPA programs, only shortsighted efforts and rhetoric attacking the tribes and their right to govern themselves. Congress annually appropriates just enough money to maintain the status quo on the reservations. There is only enough money to keep a lid on the problems, but never enough to fix them.

Yet, we need to move the spotlight off the poverty, unemployment, and social problems we face and focus the discussion on prosperity for the future, hope instead of hopelessness, change instead of stagnation. America needs to know the tribes want to succeed and will not sit still and allow the status quo to continue. We must emphasize where we want to go and the help we need to get there. Let the world know we need more jobs, more police, better schools, and a better future for our children. We need to move forward by taking the offensive, instead of remaining on the defensive. To do that, we have to go to the source, to the people who are creating the image of the tribes as the rich Indians. We spend far too much time now working for individual tribal interests and not enough time working for all Indian Country. We have to learn to work together, hand in hand on real goals and real agreements that will benefit all Indians. But this cannot happen unless we focus very deliberately on working together, working for a shared vision of the future.

This includes a new way of dealing with Congress. We are going to have to go to Congress and engage Congressmen and Senators in this national debate. Many of them are going to ask some hard questions. Sometimes, these are questions we would prefer not to answer. But we need to be ready with answers. There are going to be some attacks and for those attacks, we need to be ready to fight back. But we need to win with the facts, and we need to be persistent in communicating those facts to Congress.

I have heard some of us complain, and I have complained myself, that other groups have a great deal more influence on The Hill than the tribes, or the Bureau of Indian



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Affairs, or the Indian Health Service. Why this happens is not a mystery. The other groups work with each other, coordinating and moving forward with both the private and the federal sectors working for their common goals.

We can raise our level of influence by concentrating our efforts where they can make the greatest difference, by not being diverted from our goals by legislative sideshows, by meeting every phony allegation with the truth, and by not concentrating our efforts on small items that benefit a few tribes in the short run and stop progress on issues of national importance. We will advocate for the tribes, but the tribes and their lobbyists also need to advocate for us.

Another critical change we need to make is one that I feel very passionately about. We must learn to articulate our values as a people to the majority culture. I believe American Indians have a great deal to share with America. Our cultures have always been about sharing among ourselves, and in times of plenty, of sharing with others. Indians occupy a special place spiritually, morally, and ethically among Americans.

For example, American society has believed itself greater than nature for too long and American government has bought into this notion. American Indian people have never believed this. Through millennia of living in this place, we understand we are only a part of nature, not the masters over nature. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard well-meaning environmentalists at Interior state that if we do not stop what we are doing, we will destroy the earth. I always clarify the point. If we do not stop what we are doing, the earth will destroy us. Mother Earth will cleanse herself of human beings, unless they begin to understand what American Indians have understood for eons—we are a part of this world, not the lord high masters of it.

If we do not find a way to reach out and share what we believe with the rest of the world, then those who are ignorant of our values and beliefs will declare themselves experts on Indians and mangle and abuse these values and beliefs. Those who resent our very survival will paint our people with the brushes and colors that they choose.



Hilda A. Manuel, deputy commissioner of Indian Affairs for the BIA, exercises line authority over headquarters staff, area and field operations. She previously served as staff director of the Indian Gaming Management Staff Office, and before that was chief of the Division of Tribal Government Services and chief for the Branch of Judicial Services. She recently was awarded the Presidential Rank Award of Meritorious Executive, which recognizes career members of the Senior Executive Service who demonstrate outstanding performance and exemplify a high level of integrity and leadership. Manuel, a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, Chukut Kuk District, is a graduate of the University of New Mexico School of Law and served as a judge and tribal government administrator with the Tohono O'odham Nation. She also has served as a judge Pro Tem for a number of other American Indian tribes in the Southwest.